

### The last word Gay liberation

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 16, 1977, pp. 39-40

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In conjunction with our Special Section on "Gays and Film" in this issue, we members of the editorial board and staff of JUMP CUT want to indicate our active support for and solidarity with the struggles of lesbians and gay men.

From our first issue, JUMP CUT has defined itself as an actively anti-sexist publication. By sexism we mean the oppression of one group of people by another on the basis of sex (biology) and sexual identity (psychology) or sexual preference, activity, and lifestyle. Sexism oppresses women, gay men, and lesbians (a double oppression as women and homosexuals). The oppression of gays in our society is one aspect of sexism. Sexism plays a specific and indispensable role in maintaining capitalism and vice-versa. To fight that system of oppression, to attack its props of labor exploitation, racism, sexism, and to challenge all the other dehumanizing aspects of bourgeois culture is the task of all progressive people.

Looking at the well-financed Anita Bryant campaign against gays, we see how the reactionaries will use anti-gay consciousness to build their own strength and to reinforce their attack on the gains of the 60s, on abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, minority education and housing, welfare rights, labor advances, and other hard-won achievements. Clearly, sexual choice must be defended against encroachments by the bourgeois state. Gay civil rights are essential democratic rights. But, as immediate and tangible as the right-wing

threat seems, as the justice of sexual choice is, as the necessity to fight for democratic rights is, the struggle for homosexual liberation must be seen in a wider context.

Active support for lesbian and gay male liberation emerges as a logical concomitant of the feminist struggle against patriarchy. Patriarchy systematically divides power in society on the basis of sex. Specifically, it oppresses women as inferior within all class and strata. Feminism politically analyses and challenges patriarchy, recognizes the systematic oppression of women as a group, and fights for the liberation of all women, not simply for the individual advancement of a select few.

Patriarchy predates capitalism and still exists in contemporary socialist countries. However patriarchy is not inherently necessary to socialism, while it is an indispensable structural feature of capitalism. Patriarchy is a way of organizing society to insure adult male dominance of institutions, privileges and power. To justify this inequality, patriarchy asserts that norms of behavior are determined by clear-cut sexual differences. Therefore, patriarchy must link human sexuality directly to biological differences of species reproduction. To establish and preserve heterosexuality as an institution with the force of natural, moral, and social 'normality,' our society maintains a distinct category of non-heterosexuality; and it constructs social distinctions on the basis of sexual practices which are not neutral, but which serve to validate the dominant culture. Thus our society makes the straight life style the norm and casts gays into the position of outsider" or "deviant."

The whole spectrum of the feminist movement — from liberal feminism as seen in MS. or NOW to radical feminism and separatism to socialist feminism — has battled sex role stereotypes and the institutions and socialization which function to maintain those stereotypes. Such stereotypes mean that character types, social roles, and so-called "natural" abilities, are assigned to one group or another of the human race according to sex. Politically, to attack sex role stereotypes means to affirm — in our intellectual endeavors, our political practice, and our daily life — that sex must not be made a basis for defining human roles, no more than race should be. We acknowledge that different groups in society, particularly oppressed groups, have a unique subcultural experience and face the task of asserting their subcultural identity. One step in overcoming oppression is affirming the special and unique characteristics of the group because a distinct positive identity has often been denied, and affirmation of socio-cultural separatism is necessary to building group solidarity. At the same time we must be alert to negative aspects of subcultural identity, such as affirming gayness without attacking misogyny, racism, and ageism. But simply recognizing gay male and lesbian subculture should not then stop with straights saying, "Let them do their own thing." It is the task of progressive people in the straight culture to recognize the ways that sex differences have been

built up and maintained to act as the major support for patriarchy and one of the major supports of capitalism.

Feminists have analyzed the role of the nuclear family in maintaining capitalism. This analysis attacks the destructive split between the public sphere and the private sphere, between production and reproduction, between paid and unpaid social labor, and between Mother / Father / Girl / Boy roles and rewards. The division of life into paid and unpaid social labor, separating workplace and community, appears as a new feature under capitalism and is essential to maintaining it. The struggle against patriarchy is thus not subordinate to the class struggle, but it is itself a form of class struggle. Today we see this struggle continues in the socialist countries; the division between the public and private spheres was attacked during the Cultural Revolution in China, and in Cuba the new Family Code is a major attempt to change remaining capitalist policies and attitudes.

Gay men and lesbians affirm that sexuality is not linked to biological definitions of sex. Their stance threatens the ideological underpinnings of the nuclear family in capitalism. Lesbians, for example, as women-identified women who define themselves in terms of economic and emotional support independently of men, threaten the patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes. And all gays in society challenge the puritanical component of capitalist culture.

Bourgeois patriarchal ideology maintains these divisions. First of all, it posits as a given something which is not scientifically true. From all that we know about both humans and higher primates, social institutions should take for granted as "natural" a range of sexual expression and gratification from heterosexuality through bisexuality through homosexuality. But in our society, only straightness is recognized as normal. Furthermore, ideology never has to speak of what is normal — that is, taken for granted. A society's portrait of what is *abnormal* reaffirms its norms. And in the media, gays are always and only seen as extraordinary or abnormal, never "just plain folks" like "the viewing public" is assumed to be. As Richard Dyer points out in his article on gays in film noir, the films use gays as evil figures, clearly defined by dress and gesture, so as to prove above all that the detective hero is straight and that his is the only kind of sexuality which is unquestionably good and the "natural" heir to patriarchal power.

The fact that the media (even when liberal enough to show on the news protests against Anita Bryant) constantly depicts gays and lesbians as "deviant" or odd or extraordinary reaffirms that the rest of the audience has certain natural rights as straights. The media never presents any argument to define what it means to heterosexuals to be heterosexuals. It's just taken for granted that they have the following rights, among others — to have a job, get a bank loan, be elected to public office, raise a

family, live where one wants, show affection in public, not suffer harassment for one's sexual practices, and to have one's love problems taken as acceptable topics for both social conversation and the theme of most novels, films, and TV programs. Yet by virtue of the media kind of definitions, imposed by straights in the first place, gays are considered to have abrogated these rights — proven by the fact that it is depicted as "extraordinary" when gays fight for the most basic civil rights.

Looking at the wider context in which any serious discussion of gay issues and struggles must take place, especially at patriarchy and its role in sexism and capitalism, it is clear why the struggle against capitalist exploitation and degradation of life and for human liberation must include active support for gay male and lesbian liberation. All branches of feminism and the left must fight for gay liberation and not leave it far gays to do themselves. There is no room for the liberalism like this: "I support the right of consenting adults to do what they want to do behind closed doors." Why not? Lets look at that fallacy clearly. Right now the majority of gay people cannot become involved in political activity for gay civil rights because they do not now have those very rights which would protect their political activity. They have no other protection than secrecy, pretending they are straight, living in the closet. What does that mean for feminist and left political activism? How can any project hope to recruit someone who still feels the necessity to act as a closet gay within that group? Too often, progressive groups still force gays to pretend to be something they are not — or ask gays to not make homosexuality such a big issue or not act so 'blatant' about their life style choice. (Isn't the heterosexual couple a visibly blatant life style choice? What social structures does the visibility of the couple, especially in the media, maintain?) Homophobia too often divides the left and feminist movements off from their allies and limits everyone's struggle against systematic oppression. Gays are not just or mainly professionals, but they are also part of the working class (the standard conservative estimate is that homosexuals form 10-20% of the population, distributed evenly across class lines). Clearly working class homosexuals, like working class women and racial minorities, face a special oppression. But these are the last people, both in the Movement and in society at large, whom we allow even to articulate what their situation is.

Unless the entire feminist movement and the left fight to protect gay people who have come out, guaranteeing them the same rights that straights have — the right to maintain a job, residence and family — then gay people within those movements will not themselves be able to actively work for their own rights. We all have to give organizational support and emotional solidarity to the gay males and lesbians in our groups and in society at large. We, not they, have the responsibility to establish some real basis for gays to come out within our organizations, and we must make our projects ones in which gays would feel

comfortable working openly.

We do not ask for a sentimental support for gays or a liberal "let-them-do-their-own-thing" (often with an implied "elsewhere"). Our support comes from an analysis of a whole system of exploitation. Capitalism has used sexism to divide the working class by providing certain roles for men and women, by commodifying daily life and objectifying sexuality in advertising, and by atomizing people's lives and thus giving them a sense of powerlessness. Capitalism depends on sexism. It is a system of production that has long used and very much needs highly differentiated sex roles, and sex role stereotypes, objectified human sexuality, and alienated human relations to prop itself up. For that reason, although gayness challenges many of the basic tenets of capitalism and sexism, gay and lesbian liberation is not complete without overthrowing this system of production. Equally, any true socialist system must also challenge the manifestations of patriarchy's — and particularly capitalism's — outworn sexism such as highly differentiated sex roles.

The left, broadly speaking, has been very reluctant to support gay liberation and much of the left has actively opposed it, reproducing some of the worst antigay attitudes of straight society. In the Soviet Union, the prize-winning filmmaker Sergei Paradjanov, maker of *SHADOWS OF OUR FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS* (1964), was and remains jailed only because of his homosexuality. And in the U.S. left, various groups such as the Communist Party, the pro-Chinese Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), the Revolutionary Communist Party, and other sect groups define homosexuality as a product of bourgeois decadence. This unscientific view is then bolstered by these left groups with the charge that gay liberation is an attack on the working class family, which they see as a defense against capitalism. This view idealizes the working class family in an ahistorical way. The family is an historical institution with both progressive and reactionary aspects. While serving as a refuge from some of the worst aspects of capitalism, the family as it exists in the working class today also serves to reproduce some of the worst aspects of bourgeois ideology by oppressing women and children.

Lifestyle issues are not the primary political issues in any revolution, and, as the women's movement has shown, sexual freedom does not produce equality. Gay liberation is more than a matter of civil rights or lifestyle or private choice. In advanced capitalist countries, direct economic exploitation in the production sector is the fundamental form of class oppression. Yet increasingly in the logic of capitalist development, with its insatiable appetite for profits, such a development turns the "private" and the "personal" into the political. Capitalism has invaded and tries to commodify daily life. The fight against capitalism takes many forms, and key arenas of struggle today include daily life, personal relations, sexuality, and the family.

The struggle for gay liberation must be carried out on both the personal and institutional levels. In film studies we need a film criticism that is actively anti-sexist. Some critics have begun to look for gay images in film in a lively and vital way. Although such a task serves a needed function at this point in film criticism, as does the searching out of gay film history, we need especially a gay criticism that has a vision of human liberation. In the immediate present, such a criticism might take as its task some institutional goals — to promote specifically gay filmmaking and aid in its distribution and exhibition. Gay people in the media must have support to express their real artistic concerns and to challenge oppressive roles for gays without fear of losing their jobs. Teachers and students — both straight and gay — must begin to see gay male and lesbian cultural perspectives as something that is not peripheral but essential to understanding society as a whole. As James Baldwin said, "Until you know my name, you won't know your own."

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